

The Lost Boys: did the Romans love their children?

Jane Masségia

Growing up in Rome was a tricky business. A combination of insanitary birthing conditions, contaminated food and water, and diseases which thrived in the crowded city, meant that most Roman families experienced the death of a child. Some estimates suggest that as much as a half of Roman children died before reaching puberty. Jane Masségia considers how the Romans responded to this terrible reality.

One very practical response was to have many children, in the hope that some would survive, a practice which left its mark on Roman names like *Octavius* ('Eighth'), *Nonnius* ('Ninth'), and *Decimus* ('Tenth'). But how did they respond emotionally? Roman children were often buried without the tombstones that marked the graves of Roman adults. Does this mean that Romans were so hardened to the loss of children that they didn't feel the need to give them this attention? Did they somehow love their children less while they were young, to protect themselves from grief?

Fortunately, we are not entirely without evidence. While tombstones of Roman children may be rarer than those of adults, they are not absent altogether. And those we do have argue strongly against the notion that Romans didn't bond with their children. At the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, we have four grave-markers for Roman boys who died at different ages. Each inscription, in its own way, reveals how Roman parents placed their hopes in their child's future, and grieved when they died, regardless of how old they were.

The warrior toddler

When Macrinus Maximinus died, his father set up a tombstone intended to show his son at his best. The chubby-faced boy is on horseback, riding down a cowering (and rather odd-looking) boar, with his spear raised, while his faithful hunting dog crouches underneath the rearing horse. This hunting motif was a popular one for Roman men because it conjured up ideas of manly excellence. In the Ashmolean, we have another very similar image which decorated the tombstone of a military tribune, Pompeius Marcellinus, who died while on his way to a new posting in

Turkey.

But Pompeius Marcellinus was twenty-three years old, and was in the army. Little Macrinus Maximinus, we're told, was a year old when he died, and since Roman counting is often inclusive, he may even have been younger (i.e. *in his first year*). He was probably too young to even walk, let alone ride a horse or hunt down a boar. But the image that his father chose for his tombstone speaks of what he *hoped* his son would have achieved. It speaks of a proud father, and of dashed hopes, not a parent who had failed to bond with his little boy.

Years, months, days, hours

One of the most moving, mysterious, and damaged inscriptions in the Ashmolean collection was set up for a five-year-old boy, not by his parents, but by his owner. The little boy, whose name was perhaps Firmius, has been the *verna*, 'household slave', of a woman named Annaia Ferusa. But we know he wasn't a slave when he died because the inscription gives him three names, the *tria nomina* which were the mark of a free male citizen. So the text is a little confusing – his name tells us he was free, but his mistress still calls him a slave. Five years old is very young to be made a freedman. The most likely explanation is that his mistress knew that he was dying and freed him on his deathbed.

Not only did she give him his freedom, but she thought of him as her *carissimus*, 'dearest'. Most touching of all is how much she claimed she knew about his life in her house – not only did she know the number of years since his birth, but the months, days, and even *hours*. Roman tombstones often describe how many years, months, days an individual lived, but hours is highly unusual. There is no

guarantee that this reckoning of Firmius' life was accurate, but that was not its main purpose. It was intended to publicly quantify how much Annaia Ferusa cared for him.

Mini-me

When the young son of Numerius Ogulnius Fortunatus died at the age of eight, his father decided to have the body cremated – an expensive process, unusual for children – and the ashes stored in a delicately sculpted urn. Decorated with birds, fruit, and ram's head in deep, drilled relief, it was the height of fashion. Fortunatus had it inscribed with the traditional funerary formula – the name of the deceased and the name of the dedicator. Even in this short inscription, we can see how Fortunatus saw his son as a miniature version of himself. They shared exactly the same name, and are described in terms of identical affection: the elder was a *piissimus pater*, the younger was a *piissimus filius*. Here was a father who loved his son as a part of himself, and they matched each other in their devotion to one another.

The teenage Hercules

This tiny altar was set up for Lucius Marcius Pacatus, who died at the age of fifteen, on the brink of adulthood. As well as marking his grave, it was used in rituals to honour his memory, when offerings were burnt on its flat top. The inscription has his mother, Rodope, calling herself *infelicissima*, 'unhappiest' (using the superlative), and records, to the day, how old her son was when he died.

The images on the altar are from the stories of Hercules. The front shows an infant Hercules strangling the snake-headed Hydra, mixing two separate stories: the story of baby Hercules strangling the snakes that Juno had sent into his cot; and the story of the man-eating Hydra which the adult Hercules killed with a sword and torch. On the left side, the older, bearded Hercules hits the centaur Nessus with his club; the back of the altar shows Hercules' weapons – lion skin, club, bow and quiver; and the right side shows him, club raised, holding a Stympalian bird.

Why did Rodope choose Hercules for her son's monument? It could simply be that Pacatus had liked these stories. Or it could be that Hercules' offered a comfort to her in her grief: after he successfully completed his labours, Hercules was made a god, and entered Olympus. Perhaps Rodope hoped that her son, his labours done, had finally achieved his own kind of peace. But it is interesting that she decided to commemorate him with a monument, fronted by the infant Hercules, which presented Pacatus as a child and 'sweetest son'. At fifteen, he could have been considered a young man – the emperor Nero, after all, was only seventeen when he came to power – but Rodope loved him as a child, and publicly commemorated him as one.

Where are all the children?

We should not fall into the trap of thinking the Romans felt and behaved exactly as we do. After all, most Romans did not find slavery or gladiators problematic. But we should not be tempted to see relative rarity of children's tombstones as evidence of Roman indifference to their children. Instead, it is essential to consider how stone inscriptions in general were used in the Roman world: the Romans inscribed on stone when they wanted to make important announcements, commemorate events, and celebrate the deeds of important individuals. Stone inscriptions were *public* records. Perhaps the most obvious reason that Roman children rarely received tombstones when they died was because they were not public figures. They were not yet part of public life, and had no public achievements to record. But this, of course, does not mean they were not valued by their family, just that they and their life and death was a *private* matter.

The four tombstones from the Ashmolean, then, are in the minority, dedicated by publicly-minded individuals who wanted to bring their children to wider notice. We might, cynically, point out that they also bring their own names, money, and good taste to public notice, but they also reveal the different ways the Romans could express love for their children: they gave them their own names, they showed how they counted the days they had together, and were *infelicissimi* when they died.

Jane Masségia is a Research Fellow on the Ashmolean Latin Inscriptions Project (AshLI) at the University of Oxford. Her favourite English cemeteries include Highgate, Welford Road, and Upper Heyford.